

A Short Research Agenda for Scholars of Sustainable Cities

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As the pressure grows for cities to contribute to greater local, national and global sustainability because of global warming, peak oil production and a host of other pressing environmental, social and economic factors, it is important for researchers to study topics that have immediate policy relevance in helping cities respond to these new realities.

There is a growing practical need in cities all around the world for high quality case studies of urban development projects that are fundamentally driven by sustainability considerations. Policy people are constantly looking for practical, integrated sustainability projects developed in the real world, which involve formal sustainability assessments and which show how particular developments will contribute to improved livability and sustainability in cities. Such projects may involve developing indicators by which to measure performance in different dimensions of sustainability. These developments, be they new housing areas, big transport projects such as new public transport lines with associated urban development, or major inner city revitalisation projects, need to simultaneously contribute to enhanced, environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being, not just balance or trade off these ‘competing’ factors against each other. They need to contribute to reducing a city’s use of resources and its waste outputs while simultaneously contributing to greater livability. This usually requires solid research to provide the answers in each case, as there are still really no ‘text book’ approaches to any of this. Sustainability assessment is so new and evolving so rapidly.

There is also a strong debate around the world about how far technologies can be relied upon to deliver sustainable solutions to problems in cities, especially when compared to making other fundamental changes that some see as more difficult or that might take more time (e.g. land use change and urban restructuring). The classic debate is the one over the world oil situation and how to respond to it. This is particularly true in cities where many commentators insist that new fuel and vehicle technologies will mean that we do not have to worry about the energy issue or indeed emissions and noise as far as urban transport is concerned. Oil will simply be replaced by a new set of technologies for fuel and vehicles, which will address all these issues.

Then there are those that claim that no amount of new technology and alternative fuels will be able to replace current levels of conventional oil consumption and that fundamentally lower transport energy demand is needed. This means reducing our dependence on private transport in cities through urban and transport planning approaches that reduce travel demand. Research is needed to explore these tensions between providing new technologies for urban transport, which may in fact increase

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demand for private transport and thus exacerbate many of the other problems of motorisation such as land consumption and degradation of the public realm, and how travel demand can be reduced and shaped in new directions through appropriate infrastructure investment and land use change. For example, how true is it that technological change is really faster and more effective than reshaping the urban form of cities? What might an ideal combination be of technological innovation and physical planning changes?

On the same theme we need research that investigates what the world oil situation and in particular the peaking of world oil production means for individual cities and especially for urban transport. How will cities adapt to increasing transport fuel prices? What will happen to highly auto dependent cities or parts of cities? Will they go into decline and be abandoned due to being unable to function in transport terms? What implication does this have for food production? Will we see increasing areas set aside within and around cities to provide food with less embodied energy costs? Will some existing sprawling areas sitting on prime fertile soils be demolished and returned to agriculture? How will the impact of steeply rising transport energy costs affect different socio-economic groups? How can cities respond in a way that supports a smooth and as painless transition to a post-petroleum world, especially for those least able to afford increasingly expensive energy for transport?

These are just a few of the bigger questions that fall out of some of the big global changes that are occurring in this new millennium and which require serious and devoted attention by researchers in order to better guide policy and decision makers.